

When the Domino Falls

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"Kaine!" Karl Ancher's voice boomed over the shrill whine of a defective exhaust rocket. Anticipating trouble, technicians and tourists paused to watch, snarling the flow of traffic through Omman's hectic starport.

Beside him, Drake Paulsen flinched, startled by the harsh quality of the Corellian's voice. Embarrassed by the sudden focus of attention, the 15-year-old Socorran groaned, covering his face with the wide, black collar of his desert duster. Ahead of them, he recognized his father's lean figure, framed by the battered hull of their freighter, *Miss Chance*. The outdated YT-1300 sat alone on a private mooring dock, shadowed by the mammoth starport generators.

Shirtless except for a hand-tooled leather vest, Kaine Paulsen's lean, muscular frame glistened with sweat. A repulsorlift cargo bed full of unmarked crates sat beneath the freighter's hull where he had left them. "How are you, Lom?" he asked playfully, using Drake's Coynite name.

"Ancher's on the war path," Drake whispered. "What's going on?"

Troubled by the haunted rings beneath his son's eyes, Kaine whispered, "Don't worry," affectionately caressing Drake's neck and shoulders. Then he coolly met the Corellian's ruthless gaze. "Ancher. I've been expecting you. Thanks for bringing Drake along."

Cold recognition fluttered in the old smuggler's eyes. "Damn right you've been expecting me! If you thought I was going to stand by and watch you make the biggest, dumbest mistake of your life, then you don't think very much of me, Kaine Paulsen!" Gathering his wits and his breath, Ancher snapped his fingers in Kaine's face. "I didn't waste my time and learning to see you go soft on refugees trying to homestead on some miserable, forgotten rock! *Lofahchu ets pyroni vyoryn viske!*" he grumbled, slipping into a dialect of Old Corellian.

Kaine laughed suddenly. "Loyalty is a smuggler's worst vice?"

Ancher's face exploded with violence. "The worst! And don't you forget it!" Silver-white hair crowned Ancher's handsome face, which was well weathered by a lifetime of scars and wrinkles. Dark eyebrows arched above his eyes, mature, green eyes, clouded by mild regret. Piqued, he crossed his arms over his chest, as if shielding himself from a blow to the heart. His foot tapped querulously against the metal docking plates, an irrefutable sign of the smuggler's agitation. Despite the furor of incoming and outgoing spacecraft about them, Drake could hear the distinctive drone of Ancher's cybernetic leg, synchronizing with the Corellian's foot.

By sharp contrast, Kaine's handsome face, so deeply tanned by the Socorran sun, was smooth and flawless, radiating good charm. Unruffled by the Corellian's temper, he whispered, "Ancher, those people on the Thrugii outpost need food, medical supplies, and anything else I can think of to help them ..."

"Those people need a serious psych-eval!" Ancher spat. "Anybody who thinks they could make a living on that forsaken rock is crazy! And any fool smuggler who would deliver goods, encouraging them to stay, is even crazier! How much are they paying you?"

"Nothing right now," Kaine whispered, chided by his mentor and friend. Cautiously, he added, "But when the mine gets started, they offered ..."

"When the mine gets started? Kaine, that rock's already killed seven generations of miners! Do you really think ..."

"Damn it, Anch! I'm not some kid you picked up on one of your smuggling adventures. I'm a man, a father," he brushed a reckless brown curl from Drake's face, "And a damn good pilot."

"If those claim jumpers would make peace with the sector authorities, they could get their own pilot and leave you out this mess."

"You know that would never happen," Kaine said quietly. A trio of Imperial stormtroopers walked past, briefly observing them. "The sector authority has that planet locked down tighter than a Coynite chastity belt!" he whispered, cautiously observing the stormtroopers "That's why they need a smuggler and a good one." Kaine recognized the explosion escalating in the old man's eyes. "Ancher, I don't need your permission to make this run!"

"You don't need my permission?" Ancher's face flushed several shades of crimson. "What about those money-hungry sector officials? The ones who claim the rights to Thrugii, the asteroid belt and even the open spaces in between. What about them, Kaine?" The Corellian propped his hands on his hip, visibly shaken by the Socorran pirate's tenacity. "Even Abdi-Badawzi ..."

"Let's leave Abdi out of this, shall we?" Kaine frowned with mention of his arch-rival, the Twi'lek crime lord who ran Socorro's illicit underground. "Besides, he's too busy filling his own pockets to bother with exploiting a humanitarian cause."

"Listen to me, Kaine!" Ancher snapped. "You're ruffling the wrong tail feathers this time. Those private owners have money, political leverage, mercenaries; they might even have Imperial connections You don't want this one, boy." Suddenly, his face softened as he attempted to change his approach. "You've got a good heart, Kaine You're a better man than me to even think about this run. But you better think long and hard about the folks you're crossing and what what you stand to lose." Gently, he ran his fingers through Drake's hair clucking the anxious boy beneath the chin. "Swallow your pride. Loyalty is the worst vice a smuggler can fall into."

Cradling Drake against him, Kaine whispered evenly, "Maybe, Corellians think that way, but Socorran integrity goes too deep for that garbage. I wouldn't expect you to understand." He hesitated, stumbling over the insult. "It's just an excuse for not getting involved, and why? Because there's no money in it!"

"Drake, scratch a little gravel," Ancher growled, his eyes intent on Kaine's face.

Wanting nothing more than to stay between them, Drake hesitated. His father smiled, soothing reassurance into his rigid shoulders. "How's your Wookiee?" he asked.

Startled by the question, Drake stammered, "My Wookiee?"

"There's a problem over by the guard house. Go see if you can help them out," he whispered, pushing Drake away. "Ask for Seth." As he moved away, Drake glared at Ancher holding the Corellian solely responsible for the tension threatening to divide his loyalties.

"Go on," Kaine persisted.

Reluctant to leave either of them, even the cantankerous Ancher, Drake walked toward the port entrance. "Are you so eager to make your fortune?" he heard Ancher hiss with venom. "What about the boy?"

"Drake understands," Kaine retorted, "just like his mother."

"That little girl twisted you up good, didn't she?" Ancher barked. "She didn't make her final jump soon enough to please me!"

"You don't mean that."

"Damn right I mean it!"

"Watch your mouth, old man!" Kaine sputtered, fists balled against violence. "If you hadn't tampered with the hyperdrive ..."

"I told you that drive was unreliable! How was I supposed to know she'd birth the boy right there on the deck plates! I didn't tell her to get on that ship with you. She knew the risks and the consequences!" From a distance, Drake watched them arguing. Since early childhood, he had lived aboard ship with his father, flying the trade routes and learning the dangerous thrill of smuggling. When not accompanying his father, the young Socorran had spent his free time in strategic mental games with Ancher, plotting Kessel Runs and cheating smalltime ganglords. He knew each man intimately, familiar with their moods and eccentricities.



There had been other explosive quarrels between his father and the overly protective Corellian that were tantamount to similar arguments between Kaine and Drake. But none had ever gone so far as to merit insult. Frustrated, Drake thrust his hands into his pockets, powerless to stand between them and their dominant personalities. Not even the familiar silhouette of the *Miss Chance*, docked beyond them, could comfort the immeasurable sense of foreboding that threatened to consume the anxious boy.

Sullen, Drake moved out of the hangar arena, stepping up to the port entrance where the guard house was situated. Barely large enough to contain a full complement of staff, the small, one-room structure offered a quiet place for the port guards to rest between shifts. Drake approached the group of armed men gathered outside. "I'm looking for Seth," he whispered.

"That'll be me," huffed a portly, human man. He stared into Drake's face with focal intensity. "Aren't you Kaine Paulsen's boy?" The security director grinned astutely, sweeping his gaze from side to side. "Do I need to ask? You look just like him. Do you understand Wookiee?"

Drake shrugged absently, catching a quick glimpse of his father and Ancher still arguing by the *Miss Chance*. Though the dock was barely 10 meters away, the continual echo of blast rockets and welding equipment drowned out their voices.

"Come on in and whatever you do, don't spook," Seth cautioned, moving his stout body through the narrow bulkhead that framed the blast door. "Stay calm and move slow."

Before Drake could question the peculiar directives, he felt a blast of hot air escaping from the small compound. With horror, he realized that it was not a breeze, but a voice, booming from the back of the room. Dodging several projectiles, the young Socorran backtracked, falling into Seth's waiting arms. "Now steady on there!" Seth scolded, shielding the boy against the wall.

Perplexed, Drake realized that Seth was not speaking to him directly, but to the figure standing only meters away from the blast door. A formidable 2.4 meters tall, muscles twitching beneath a deep layer of black fur, the territorial Wookiee dropped to one knee. As the muzzle leveled off at chest level, Drake could see that the bowcaster was set and fully charged.

"Tell him to put the gun down!" Drake cried.

"He's a she, young Paulsen," Seth laughed. "And besides, you're the expert. You tell her to put the gun down."

Drake straightened his coat, moving away from the guardsman's support. "She should understand Basic," he whispered nervously. "Don't you?"

The Wookiee bawled insufferably. It was a sound that Drake could only translate as intense loneliness and abandonment. "She's scared." The reaction to his translation was immediate; relieved to be understood by someone, she propped the bowcaster against the chair, openly explaining her desperate situation. "And she's hungry."

Seth scoffed, "What does one feed a Wookiee?"

Drake approached her cautiously, reaching into his pocket for his last protein bar. "Easy," he soothed, offering it to her. "It's not much, but we can get you more."

Her face brightened, silver highlights showing at her brow and nobly set cheekbones. Framed by a mixture of black and silver fur, her opaque blue eyes were cloudy with exhaustion and sorrow. She took the bar, gingerly sniffing at the contents. Drake delighted in the momentarily contact, feeling the smooth warmth of her shaggy mane against his hand. Bawling in a sedate voice, the Wookiee moaned and returned the dehydrated bar.

"No, you can have it," he assured her, nervously taking that moment to ruffle the fine, black fur beneath his inquisitive fingers. Intrigued, the boy stared up at her, admiring the silver accents that swept through her neck and arms, down across her broad shoulders and over her back. "Where'd she come from?"

"Space tramp dropped her off here," Seth replied, settling his heavy frame into a chair by the door. "Tells me to find transport for her. He emphasized safe transport and hauls 24 cases of Corellian ale into my office to make sure the job gets done."

Drake whistled, impressed by the payment. "Why the trouble?"

"Evidently the old man's hyperdrive was ready to implode, sending him, her, and most of his crew into the final jump with a bang!" He clapped his hands together. "According to him, the Wook held the drive together with nothing but a few pins, a little Jawa snot, and an emperor's ransom of good luck. Old man claims his hyperdrive hasn't run that well in over 20 years."

"So you're a tech, huh?" Drake teased the Wookiee.

She shrugged, gingerly biting into the ration bar. Almost immediately, her nose wrinkled with the bitter taste. As hunger won out over reluctant appetite, Drake watched in fascination.

"Why's she offworld?"

"Her folks smuggled her out," Drake replied, listening to her strained voice, "shortly after the Empire took over Kashyyyk. She's been on the run ever since."

"I guess so," Seth chuckled deeply, "what with the bounty being offered for free Wookiees."

With mention of a bounty, the Wookiee bellowed fiercely, snatching her bowcaster and anything else she could grasp as ammunition. Dodging an assault barrage of tin cups, storage containers, and power packs, Seth flipped over, shattering the chair beneath his substantial bulk.

"Nikaede!" Drake scolded gently, prying a smoke grenade from her large hands. "He was kidding." Scowling at the security official, he demanded, "You were kidding, weren't you?"

"Honest, Wook!" Seth grinned, remaining under the table. "No love for the Empire here."

Successfully retrieving the grenade, Drake asked, "What have you arranged?"

"Transport to Tatooine."

"Mos Eisley?"

"It's an agreeable atmosphere," Seth grunted, struggling to his feet. "And if she's really a good tech, I can set her up working modified ships out of port."

"Tatooine's a good place to hide," Drake whispered. "No Imperial paperwork. And if you're handling ship modifications for smugglers, no one will bother, not even tracers." Then, reminded of the seclusion that often plagued him, he selfishly added, "But I know an even better place. You could come back to Socorro with me." The Wookiee howled inquisitively. "My dad's the best pilot in the business, but an average technician. He could use a good mechanic."

Nikaede howled immediate appreciation, sweeping the young Socorran into her massive arms. Feeling his rib cage bending beneath the Wookiee's might, Drake croaked, "Sure Nik, we just need to figure a way to get you offworld."

"Leave that to me," Seth almost sang with great ceremony.

"Boss!" crackled a voice over Seth's comlink. "Boss!" Briefly, the sound of blaster fire echoed outside the door.

"Stormtroopers!" Drake cried, recognizing the distinctive pulse of Imperial-issue weaponry. Quickly taking the bowcaster from the chair, he stowed it beneath a pile of discarded flight suits. "Stay calm," he whispered to Nikaede, pinning the Wookiee between himself and the wall.

Rattling like predatory teeth against the metal, white-armored fingers forced their way through the blast door. Visibly stunned, two starport guards slumped to the floor. "I'm in command here," Seth's operatic voice boomed. "By whose authority ..."

Outflanking each other, the stormtroopers hurried into the room. Their squad leader marched through the blast door, violently thrusting his rifle into Seth's sternum. "This station falls under the jurisdiction of ..." his voice trailed off, shocked into silence by the Wookiee and the boy standing in the back of the compound. Two other stormtroopers stepped into the room, flanking the walls. "Cease your fire!" the ranking soldier screeched, as they leveled their weapons at the Wookiee. "You might hit the boy."

"Yes, you might indeed hit the boy," Seth grumbled. "And cause an incident that would take millions of credits to hide. Not to mention embarrass your superiors ..."

"Quiet!" The stormtrooper moved away suddenly, then returned, thrusting his rifle butt into the security official's chest. Drake was helpless to act as Seth collapsed to the floor. "You!" the stormtrooper pointed to Drake. "Where's the permit for that animal?"

"Permit?" Drake piped, his voice raising an octave higher than he expected.

Breathless, Seth groaned, "The boy hasn't got a permit. What do you expect? His uncle only purchased the creature a few moments ago." He pointed to the stacked cases of Corellian ale in the corner. "I was acquainting the child with commands and important hygiene instructions. There's no crime in that." The security man hesitated, staring at the stormtrooper. "Or is there?"

"What's going on here!" demanded a gruff voice.

"Uncle Ancher!" Drake whined. Mustering all his energy for a childhood tantrum, the boy cried, "Uncle Ancher, tell the soldiers. You bought the *chumani* for me! They want to take her away." Silently imploring Ancher to play along with the ruse, he added, "You won't let them, will you? After you paid for her. Twenty-four cases of Corellian ale is a lot, isn't it, Uncle Ancher? That's what you told me. You said nothing was worth 24 cases of your Corellian ale, not even an Imperial bribe ..."

"*Koccic suling!*" Ancher spat to silence the insipid prattle. Despite the rough indignity of a blaster rifle wedged against his spine, he turned on the stormtroopers, feigning a disgruntled Imperial citizen. "Since when did the Emperor allow his forces to traumatize children and helpless animals!"

"This creature belongs to you?" the squad leader demanded.

"I bought her for the boy, his *chumani*." He hesitated, staring into the soldier's unreadable face. "*Chumani*, gentlemen, is Old Corellian for *companion*; or so I've been told." Ancher leaned toward the stormtrooper, whispering, "Come, come man, have a little compassion. The boy just lost his mother day before last." Pulling a chit of credits from his pocket, he straightened, saying, "I understand there is a question of tariffs to pay, permits..."

"All licensing takes place at the Bureau of Customs. You will accompany us there immediately."

Ancher hesitated. "I see," he sniffed, glaring at Drake. "Lead on my good man."

Though the presence of stormtroopers was a common phenomenon on Omman, a culturally diverse planet, the presence of a Wookiee, a boy, and an older man being herded between a squad of Imperial soldiers proved to be something of a spectacle. During the brief walk across the starport intersection, the stormtroopers pressed through throngs of curious tourists who stumbled across their path. Never breaking formation, they led the prisoners through the narrow streets and into the Bureau of Custom's antiseptically clean front station.

An Imperial clerk was sitting behind a spacious desk as they were brought into the building. "Hold please," he snarled, never bothering to glance up. Drawn into a long frown, his gnarled, haggard face wore the unpleasant expression of overwork and general dislike for the public.

Safely eclipsed by Nikaede's shadow, Drake leaned against Ancher, whispering, "Did my dad get off the dock?"

Cautiously, Ancher hummed impatiently, nodding positively to acknowledge his request, while effectively getting the Imperial clerk's attention.

"What can I do for you?" the agent asked in a low nasal tone.

"These people need to register an exotic animal," the stormtrooper replied, shoving Ancher toward the desk.

"Type of animal?"

"A Wookiee," Ancher growled.

"How will the animal be used?" the clerk continued, punching the necessary codes into the datapad. "Concubine. Laborer. House servant. Hunting. Breeding stock."

"*Chumani*," Drake replied.

The Imperial agent looked up, managing to glare down his protracted, irregular nose. "*A chumani*?"

Ancher curbed his temper and whispered, "A companion." Then glaring at Drake, he added, "A child's companion."

The clerk rolled his eyes, exasperated, then scanned the datapad before him. "That will be 1,000 credits for a temporary offworld permit. Vaccinations, physical examinations, and temperament adjustments are extras. Do you wish to ..."

"No."

"Then that will be an additional 500 credits."

"But I don't want the vaccinations or..."

"The fee is not for any of those services. It's a calamity insurance surcharge." The adjutant began formatting the temporary registration, officially notarizing the documents with the Imperial seal. "If the animal should get loose and injure someone, you'll be partially covered."

"If the animal gets loose, you won't have to worry about injury!" Ancher snapped. "You'll be dead, along with anybody else fool enough to get in a Wookiee's way."

"Ancher," Drake cautioned him. The Corellian relented, retrieving the credit chit from his pocket.

"Thumb imprint here, please," the clerk directed, handing the datapad to the irascible tourist.

Drake stifled a protest, recognizing the personal identification unit. Designed to tap into a galactic reservoir of information, the mechanism granted access to background data, criminal records, or military status. Though Ancher's reputation among peers was a topic of envy, worthy of emulation by would-be smugglers, his record as a galactic felon was, without exception, on the verge of legendary proportions. The young Socorran felt faint with the realization that one imprint would lead authorities and bounty hunters right to the Corellian.

Casually reaching up to scratch his ear, Ancher pressed his thumb against the sensor pad, throwing Drake a mischievous grin. Almost immediately, the machine bleeped in protest, unable to register the print. "That's the third time today!" the clerk hissed, snatching the datapad from the civilian. "We'll have to do it manually! Get their names," he snapped at the nearest office aide.

"No need," another officer cooed in an even baritone. Approaching from the rear, an Imperial official entered the front room, followed by an entourage of stormtroopers. Obedient to the snapping of his fingers, all the stormtroopers raised their rifles, targeting the subjects at the desk.

"Colonel Veese!" the clerk gushed, finding himself in the line of fire.

"Talk about being put on a hurt vector," Ancher hissed through a half smile.

The Imperial straightened, his tall, thin figure framed by broad shoulders. Sparse insignia, pinned with meticulous regard, betrayed an insidious nature. "His name? Karl Mathieu Ancher. Homeworld? Corellia. Age? Oh, I'd say 57 years. Occupation? Illegal trafficking of controlled commodities." Thoughtfully, Veese slapped a leather thong against the polished sheen of his boots. "The data from his criminal record could disable or destroy the processing systems of a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer."

"Colonel Weasel!" Ancher grinned, purposely mispronouncing the name. "After all these years, you still remember me. Boy, meet an old friend of mine, Colonel Weasel." He winked, "By the way, Weasel, how's that pretty wife of yours?"

Still indignant with the Corellian's illicit affair with his then newlywed bride, Veese balled his fist, striking the smuggler in the mouth. Stunned by the officer's sudden violence, the stormtroopers were slow to react, closing to restrain Drake and the Wookiee.

Temper in check, Ancher recovered, rubbing his bruised jaw. "Well," he spat blood on the polished floors, "still meaner than a rancor with a bad tooth."

"Lt. Criss," Veese addressed the clerk, "every purebred hound has fleas. I want you to meet one of mine." Arrogantly, he took the identification pad from the agent's slack hands and rubbed the sensor face against Ancher's coat. "Watch very carefully Lieutenant," he warned. "You're about to learn a very important lesson; a critical lesson every successful smuggler inherits from his mentor." Veese snapped his fingers, waving his hand toward the Corellian. Two of his stormtroopers shouldered their weapons and grasped Ancher's arms, restraining the smuggler between them. "When processing any type of background information, never take your eye off the suspect. Never let them touch their eyes," he wiped at his narrow eyes, "their ears," he scratched inside his ears, "or behind their ears. Don't even let them touch their mouths or noses." Rubbing the thin layer of ear wax and grease across the surface of his thumb, he pressed it against the sensor pad. Immediately, the machine bleeped inconclusive results. "Any type of oil or waxy residue will disable the scanner and without knowing it, you could give important documents to a known galactic felon."

"I had no idea," Criss groveled, fearing repercussions.

"I wouldn't expect you to," Veese replied snidely, wiping the grease from the disabled scanner. He pressed Ancher's thumb against the clean surface. "I spent the whole of my junior grade tracking down this and other scoundrels, learning the tricks they employed." Gloating, the haughty officer whispered, "There's a terrible price to be paid by the hunter who, in order to be successful, becomes very much like his prey."

The ID sensor blinked erratically, correlating the processed information. Criss examined the garbled muddle of codes and the returning message. "This could take some time," he whispered. "We've been experiencing some interference with the signal. If there's any information, it should arrive by morning."

Veese's face darkened. "Until then," he hissed, "I want him held."

"And the boy?"

"I'm staying with you, Ancher," Drake whispered, glaring at the Imperial officer. "Nikaede?"

The Wookiee bawled, delivering a scathing insult to the stormtroopers as they cautiously moved toward her.

"If only a third of the Emperor's citizens would show the loyalty found among these criminals, the Rebellion would have been crushed years ago. Take them to the holding cells," Veese directed. "I'll return in the morning for Karl Ancher. As for the boy and the Wookiee, you may deal with them in any way you wish."

Veese and his armed entourage retreated into an adjacent section of the Bureau. Wary, the Bureau security guards herded Drake, Ancher, and Nikaede into a separate passage, leveling their weapons primarily at the Wookiee. "Well ain't that a heinous thing to say to me?" Ancher grumbled. Avoiding the low bulkhead, he walked into the darkened cell. "I've been called many things in my time, but never a flea."

A glow rod ignited in the cell. "That's 'cause everyone knows, it's the old fleas that make you scratch the worst." There was laughter from the dark rim beyond the light.

Ancher spun slowly, shielding Drake behind him. "I know that cocky snicker." Throwing a restraining hand against the defensive Wookiee, he whispered, "Tait? Tait Ransom?"

"None other," the smuggler said slowly, offering his hand to the Corellian. "Bad to see you, Ancher. Never figured you to do time in an Imperial lockup."

"Drake, come over here," Ancher beamed, moving into the light. "This here is the best damned smuggler I've ever had the chance to cheat." The aging Corellian winked playfully, elbowing the boy in the chest. "The only man with guts enough to even rival your pop."

Drake shook the stranger's hand, marvelling at the raven black hair that flowed in thick waves around the handsome face. Dark skin framed even darker eyes, casting an odd, swarthy aura over a lean, powerful figure. He was older than Drake, perhaps a bit younger than his father, surrounded by the ageless atmosphere of a man used to living on the edge. "This is Nikaede," he introduced the Wookiee. "What are you doing here?" Ancher demanded.

"I just got nominated to a hard-time academy. The blackheads caught me lifting some there special gear. Armor. Weapons. The expensive stuff." Ransom shrugged nervously. "They're shipping me off to Vizcarra."

"The Imperial prison planet?"

"Yep," Ransom whispered. "And here I sit, picking my nose hairs, with half of my crew docked across the street, waiting for me. By dawn, my co-pilot will figure I got snuffed on the job and will jump planet."

"Tait," Ancher scolded, "ain't like you to be caught without a plan. What happened?"

"This happened," Ransom replied. He threw a cylindrical object toward him. "Or rather it didn't happen." Ancher deftly caught the personal transponder in his hand. "When the Imperial armory alarms went off, that transponder was supposed to alert my back-up team." Frustrated, he whispered, "Somehow it got busted in the shakedown and without the signal, the Boys in White tracked us down faster than old Jabba could lay claim to a debt. No backup, no chance, no way out."

"Where are they?" Drake asked timidly, staring around at the empty cells. "The other half of your crew?"

Ransom pursed his thick lips together, handsome, even the midst of a frown. "Permanently retired, kid. Since I was the leader, they kept me alive to make an example."

"Can't you fix it?" Ancher questioned, examining the unit.

"If it were a ship's transponder, I could fix it, change it, make it sing the Republic anthem." Ransom shook his head, as a few dark strands fell into his eyes. "That thing? I haven't got a clue."

"Can I see that transponder?" Drake took the unit from Ancher, handing it to the Wookiee. "Can you fix it?"

"Hold on now," Ransom protested.

Drake silenced him with a dismissive gesture. Holding the glow rod over a nearby cot, he watched Nikaede pull the delicate leads through the top section. Yowling to herself, the Wookiee began to inspect each wire, sniffing out the defective cord. She carefully disconnected a stray cable, making a rough assessment of the damage, then promptly set about wrapping the wire around the lead heads, continuing to peel the housing apart. "Tait," the Socorran boy whispered, "you better help her. I don't know much about transponder codes. She's afraid she might alter the signal."

Moving beside Ancher, Drake leaned against the scuffed plastishield enclosure. The cell wall was constructed of a clear plastic fiber, reinforced with antiquated steel bars that had been welded against the structure. The old smuggler's eyes were distant and stony, seeing nothing beyond the darkness. "Whatcha thinking, Ancher?"

The Corellian sniffed, a smile playing across his lips. "I was just thinking of all the stupid stunts I've pulled in my lifetime. All the suicidal runs, the friends I made ... and enemies," he growled, frowning suddenly. Then the characteristic smirk returned. "And of course the ladies," Ancher sighed nostalgically. "You know, when that report comes in tomorrow, there could be enough warrants against me to total 300,000 credits." He hesitated. "I used to think that was a mark of distinction."

"What changed your mind?"

"The value of life, Drake. The value of my life." He ruffled the boy's hair. "And the few people I care about."

"Is that why you and my dad argued today? You're worried about him?"

"Drake, I don't agree with what your father is doing. He's asking for too much trouble, bad trouble." He averted his gaze. "The same kind of trouble that started this bad blood between me and that Imperial stiff. Somebody tried to warn me, telling me it wasn't worth it, not for one night with a pretty gal." He shrugged, eyes clouding with the memory. "But at the time," he whispered, conjuring a mental image of the young woman, "it certainly seemed worth it."

"He only wants to help those people, Ancher."

"What will he prove? What will he have when it's over, if he survives."

"He won't know that until it's done." Drake hesitated, hearing his father's bitter tone in his own voice. "Ancher, you've been living on Socorro all these years and you still don't understand. Maybe a Corellian smuggler could look the other way, but a Socorran smuggler can't. It goes against our nature."

"That's what your father said!"

"Because there's a difference, Ancher. You call it pride. I call it honor." Drake took a shuddering breath. "Why do you think bounty hunters avoid Socorro? Because you and others like you are protected by Socorran tradition, a tradition that kneels to no government, no authority, no law."

Subdued, the Corellian moved away, shielding the pride behind his eyes. "Damned if you're not just like him."

Grinning, Drake replied, "Why should that surprise you?" Behind them, he heard Nikaede's low voice, miserably yowling defeat.

"You did your best, Wook," Ransom consoled, needing no translation to define her surrender. "Damn it!" he spat, roughly brushing his hands through thick, black hair. "There's got to be another way!"

"Ancher," Drake whispered. He leaned his head against the smuggler's chest. "We can't stay here."

"We're not, Drake," Ancher soothed, cradling the boy against him. "Tait, we don't need that damned thing. Risking a few lumps, we could ditch this place and get to the starport."

"We'll take more than few lumps," Ransom chuckled. "They keep at least six armed security men and two stormtroopers overnight."

Staring up at the Wookiee, Ancher grinned. "The odds sound right about even." Challenging Nikaede, he whispered, "Why don't you go over there to them bunks and show us how you feel about the Imperials taking over your homeworld."

Nikaede humphed inquisitively, inclining her head to one side. "We need a distraction, Nikaede," Drake explained. "Go on, show them how you feel about being locked up in here."

Howling a maniacal war cry, Nikaede threw a side kick, high and wide, smashing the exterior window and bending the bars beyond the building. Retractable climbing claws sprang forward, slicing walls and ripping through bedding. Demolishing the small cell, she snatched at the bunks, easily ripping the bottom tier from the wall. For a moment, Drake thought the Wookiee had really berserked, watching pensively as she swung the cot over her head.

Ancher grabbed the young Socorran, pulling him into a safe corner. "Help!" he started shouting. "Somebody help!"

"The shag's gone bloody!" Tait screamed, slapping his hands against the cell wall. "You plastic heads get me out of here!" He flinched visibly as Nikaede grasped the top bunk tier and yanked, shattering plaster and cement as she ripped the bolts from the floor. Summoned by the alarmed voices, four guards and a stormtrooper burst into the cellblock, brandishing weapons.

"She's berserk," Ancher said calmly. "It happens when they get penned up like this."

"You idiots put her in here!" Ransom screamed. "Get her out before she comes after me next!"

"10-33, Code Blue," the stormtrooper reported over the comlink. "Get them out!" he snapped to the security team.

Accessing the keypad, the sentry opened the door, pulling Drake and Ancher out of the cell. As the other stormtrooper and the remaining sentries rushed to the scene, another guard grabbed Ransom by the sleeve, forcing the smuggler behind the security team and out of danger. Storming the deranged Wookiee, the first stormtrooper secured his rifle and fired a quick burst.

"No!" Drake screamed and lunged at the guard beside him. Swinging his fists in wide, controlled arcs, he managed to dislodge the rifle. The result was a wild ricochet that bounced off the corner wall before striking the Wookiee. Nikaede howled in pain as the bolt struck her shoulder and arm.

Dodging the stormtrooper, Ancher reached for the blaster rifle. But before he could accomplish his goal, the raging Wookiee snatched the rifle from the stormtrooper's frantic hands, breaking the weapon over his head. Shrugging off the singed burns, Nikaede roared, charging the door with the wrecked rifle locked in her grip.

Ransom leaped against the plasti-shield wall, unexpectedly rebounding onto the astonished guards. Beneath his flailing fists and elbows, two men fell to the floor unconscious. "Drake!" Negotiating a spinning back kick, he knocked the second stormtrooper into the wall. Unfortunately, as the stormtrooper fell, he took three of the other guards and Drake to the floor with him. Wrestling through a tangle of legs and arms, Ransom quickly grasped the stormtrooper by the head and twisted sharply, effectively breaking the Imperial's neck and removing the combat helmet.

Alarmed by the sight of Drake being held and beaten by the remaining guards, Ancher grabbed one of them from the floor, slamming his fist into the man's jaw and smashing his knee against another sentry's mouth. Nikaede swarmed through the guards with unmitigated violence, fracturing skulls beneath her fingers.

"I'm okay," Drake whispered, as she pulled him from the carnage.

"Rusty!" Ransom screamed into the commandeered comlink. He manipulated the signal transmitter. "Rusty?"

"Tait, we heard you got snuffed!" came the startled reply. "Where are you?"

"In the Imperial playpen across the street." Ransom chuckled. "Look, Rusty, I got a little Imperial hot foot."

"What's their ETA?"

Ransom stared at the alarm that tripped when the stormtrooper fired his blast rifle. "About 10 minutes for them to get here," he replied. "Five to figure out what happened and another five to start closing down the port."

"Acknowledged, I'll have Seth clear a path for us."

"Don't worry, my boys'll handle it," Ransom urged, ushering Drake and the Wookiee to the door. "Just run!"

They followed the outside walls of the Bureau jail, staying in the shadows. The streets were quiet except for a herd of distracted Ithorian tourists, who were examining a series of carbonite plaques displayed against the starport wall. Darting across the street, they slipped into the port entrance, using the Ithorians to dodge a squad of stormtroopers running toward the exit signs, which led to the outside street.

Inside the hangar arena, Ransom recognized the portly security executive. Standing beside a security sealed dock that was reserved for port authority ships, Seth quickly motioned to one of his guards. He acknowledged the all clear sign from the Elomin and nodded, waving the fugitives into the massive shadow of the starport generators. Leading them into the inner recesses of the port docks, he scolded, "Tait Ransom, somehow you always seem to stir up trouble when you're around."

"I had a good teacher," Ransom replied, throwing an accusing look at Ancher.

Guiding Drake by the shoulder, Seth led them to Omman's government controlled dock. "I've relayed our emergency coordinates to your co-pilot. Here," he surrendered the bowcaster to the Wookiee. "Hopefully, you won't need this before you get off the planet."

"How is the traffic?" Ransom asked breathlessly, scanning the starport floor for stormtroopers.

"Clear," Seth reported. "So don't bother to declare your departure. The tower is aware of the problem."

"I owe you, Seth. We all owe you a big one."

"I'll expect a few cases of Socorran raava to arrive within the next 24 hours."

"Agreed," Ancher snapped, ushering Drake and the Wookiee onto the dock. "Even if I have to fly it here myself!"

The rotund security director bowed deeply, "Clear skies, gentlemen and lady." His shadow played against an adjoining corridor wall, then vanished in the darkness beyond the access tunnel.

"Come on!" Ransom hollered. An ominous Corellian gunship sat moored at the dock, locked tight and sealed for departure, except for the cargo bay. Sprinting up the ramp, Drake tripped and slid across the polished floor as the pressurized seal began to close.

"Go, go!" Ransom screamed as the boy recovered. Bracing themselves across the interior hull wall, the fugitives struggled against the turbulence of the gunship's sudden liftoff.

"Where to, Boss?" Rusty's voice echoed in the empty cavern of the cargo bay.

"Socorro!" Ransom screamed over the wail of modified ion drives. The cargo deck plates rumbled violently beneath him as the gunship shifted to the side. "Rusty, what's the update on traffic?"

"Seth arranged for a small diversion on the other side of the planet." The co-pilot's disembodied voice snorted mirthfully over the comm. "We have a free ride."

Exhausted, Ransom slid to the floor, holding his head between his arms and knees. "Yhew!" he exclaimed. "This ought to put a hefty price on all our heads." Turning to Drake, he ruffled the boy's hair. "Congratulations, kid, you just made the billboards."

* * *

Beneath the shroud, cloudless skies of his beloved Socorro, curled beneath his favorite woolen blanket, Drake shivered in the cold air blasting from the circulation vents. A drowsy smile curled over his lips as he lay against the pillows, reliving those exciting moments in the cluttered confines of his mind. Exhausted, he stretched beneath the warmth of his comforters, savoring the grainy sensation of Socorran sand between his toes. Nearby, he heard Nikaede's gentle snores and he sighed, wondering what new adventures tomorrow would bring for him and the overly sensitive Wookiee.

Momentarily startled, the young Socorran was fully awakened by Tait Ransom's charismatic voice, echoing from the main sitting area beyond his bedroom. Fumbling through the darkness, he stumbled over the sleeping Wookiee. Nikaede yawned, exposing a mouthful of glistening fangs. Rolling to her side, she embraced the bowcaster protectively against her chest and fell back to sleep. Relieved, Drake tiptoed to the wall, easing into the shadows. As his consciousness sharpened, he focused on the whispered voices and heard his name, his father, and something about the *Miss Chance*.

"Are you sure, Tait?" Anchor groaned.

"I'm telling you, Anchor, as soon as we broke from hyperspace, we picked up his signal and followed it into the asteroid belt." Ransom growled irritably, forcing the words from his throat. "We kept getting closer and closer, until finally we were sitting right on top of the signal."

"He was hiding then," the old guard argued. "Some of those asteroids are enormous. You might have been sitting right on top of him."

"We were sitting on top of him, Anchor." Ransom slumped into a nearby chair, cradling his head beneath his knees. "On top and right in the middle. There wasn't much left." Distraught, he sat up, unable to shake the images of the gutted freighter, drifting through the erratic course of the asteroid belt.

Anchor closed his eyes, guarded against tears. "I told him not to go. Warned him there'd be trouble."

"What about the boy, Anchor?" Tait whispered.

"Drake?" Anchor gasped. Firmly shaking his head, he blurted, "I can't tell him. I ... I wouldn't know what to say."

Drake felt his heart clench, his chest tightening beneath his hands. "You don't have to say anything, Anchor," the young Socorran whispered. Forcing a breath into his lungs, he walked into the main room.

"Drake," Anchor cried, "I don't know ... sorry isn't enough, boy." Numb, Drake moved into the inner antechamber, avoiding Ransom's intense gaze.

"Drake," he heard the Corellian whisper, a note of command in his voice. Before Ransom could stop and reason with him, he snatched his boots from the outer wall and sprinted into the cold dawn. Socorro's ever intruding sands sucked at his feet, weighing him down as he raced up the face of the dune to the empty landing field beyond the compound. There were no signs of the *Miss Chance*. Exaggerated by the ascending sun, the desert swells formed false mountain ranges against the stony surface of the planet.

Breathless, Drake sank to his knees, beating his fists into the sand. Raised on a gentle zephyr, a spray of sand sifted into his eyes, summoning immediate tears. "I won't let you go!" Drake screamed to the sun. "I won't let you go," he cried, surrendering to the embrace of the black sands.

It was eventide before Drake stirred. Stretched out on the sweltering sand, he lay face down with no shelter or shirt to protect his shoulders and back. His skin burned with intensity, inflamed by Socorro's unrelenting sun. Gritting his teeth, he endured this self-induced

punishment, a purification meant to burn the guilt from his heart, if not from his mind. Dazed by the extreme heat, the boy sat up, startled to find Nikaede sitting nearby on the dune.

Perched on the ridge, she seemed no more out of place than the sand, her black pelt blending into the Socorran landscape. Drake rose to his feet, wincing as the burns across his back pulled and twinged with every motion. Walking with deliberate slowness, he moved up the crest, momentarily staring into the Wookiee's eyes. Close to tears, injured both physically and emotionally, he sat down on the dune beside her.

Nikaede tipped her head back against her shoulders, howling in a low, mournful voice that echoed within her throat. Growing steadily louder, it was not an unpleasant sound and seemed to linger, reverberating against the dunes and the clear sky.

"Is that how Wookiees mourn their dead?" Drake asked, intrigued by the bizarre act. He listened intently as Nikaede explained how her people gathered by honor families, howling, wailing, even challenging death, to bring solidarity to the survivors. The grieving boy shrugged against the tightening burns across his shoulders. In silence, he listened to the names of Wookiee uncles and cousins, grandparents and playmates, marking them all in memory, as was the tradition. A little smile forced its way to his lips when the Wookiee howled an odd melody that vaguely resembled his father's name.

"Drake!" Ancher called. The Corellian appeared just over the dune crest. Behind him, Tait Ransom stiffly navigated the unsteady ridge of sand, leaving his landspeeder humming nearby on the desert floor. Sullen, the rogue smuggler paused self-consciously, staring into the young Socorran's face. Abruptly, he took Drake's hand, pressing a 1,000 credit chit into the boy's palm. "Before my old man took off for the other side of the galaxy, he put 1,000 credits in my hand and told me to go burn in a rancor pit." He shifted uneasily in the sand. "There was no love lost between us -- but that's the way it usually goes with those of us who run the shadows."

Shaking his reckless black mane, Ransom stared into the setting sun, as if gathering his courage. "I learned the runner's trade from Ancher. Right here on Socorro. I left to make a name for myself, outside the shadow of Kaine Paulsen. Don't much matter what the untold histories will write about yesterday, today, or tomorrow." He thrust his hands into his pockets. "I'll always be second best to him ... and you." Ransom chuckled, clucking the boy on the chin. "I don't have it in my genes to be the greatest pirate in Socorran history." He cleared his throat of tears. "They'll be watching you, Drake. Jabba, Abdi-Badawzi, from Nal Hutta to Tatooine, they'll have their eyes on you 'cause they want what you've got ... what your father had. Take that 1,000, it's a rough start, but that's the one thing we all have in common."

Staring at Ancher, Ransom forced a breath through his wide nostrils. "You were right to put ole Ancher in his place. There is something different about Socorrans, something that separates them from the rest. If it's heart, then go where your heart takes you, kid." The smuggler retreated, starting back down the dune to his vehicle. "Don't never regret what you've done or what you will do. And don't never look back." Ransom hesitated as he climbed into the landspeeder. "Clear skies, kid." Revving the engine a few times, he sped into the badlands, leaving a billowed, black cloud in his wake.

"He's a good man," Ancher whispered, moved by Ransom's gesture. "Not much of a pilot, but one feisty fighter." Cradling Drake against him, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

"I don't feel anymore, Ancher. There just doesn't seem to be any reason," he replied incredulously. "No cause."

"The only good cause is a dead cause, I'm afraid. It's the only kind that brings people together."

Staring across the darkening horizon, Drake asked, "Will I know my cause?"

"When the domino falls, it's every man for himself," Ancher replied. "When the time comes, you'll know it, boy."

Drake sank weakly to his knees. "But what if I make a mistake? What if I don't listen when I should? Take on a job that's too big?"

"Drake," the old guard smuggler chuckled softly, "making choices is all about making mistakes. Everybody's guaranteed to make a few. That's why they call it living." The smuggler shuffled away, leaving Drake and Nikaede alone with the coming night wind.

Staring into the expansive badlands, Drake contemplated Socorran traditions, whose intricate ties with the tragically short lives of pirates and smugglers left no room for dramatic ceremony. There would be no savage wild fires or elaborate rituals to celebrate the death of Kaine Paulsen. No moment of silence, not even a scream in the night, to commemorate the spirit of a dead pirate. There would just be memories, offworld memories, and hushed whispers of fallen glory.

Abruptly, the wind was still. For one tranquil moment, no grain of sand shifted. The ever-changing face of Socorro remained unchanged.

Then, as abruptly as it had ceased, the breeze swept in from the badlands, carrying a chill. "Nikaede, I need your help," Drake whispered. "I have to do something," he hesitated, "and I can't do it alone."

Nikaede pounded a fist against her broad chest, bellowing a staunch oath of fealty to the young pirate. As if daring the waning glory of Socorro's sun to challenge the integrity of her honor, she raised her bowcaster and uttered a tremendous war cry to the dimming skies.

Intrigued, Drake grinned, whispering, "Was that a life debt?" His smile widened and a deep sense of completion began to swell within him. Shaking the sand from his leggings, the young Socorran stood up. "Come on," he whispered and started walking into the ominous stretches of the Doaba Badlands.

It was nearly dawn when they reached the hidden entrance to the dormant volcano. Filtered sunlight illuminated the volcanic crown, sifting down through the darkness. In the basement hollow, the delicate rays faintly sketched the silhouette of a Ghtroc freighter. Moored on a modified set of strut supports, the radiant visage of the *Steadfast* stirred Drake's memories of late-night flight schedules with his father, prepping the ship for her first smuggling runs.

Intrigued by the customized renovations, Nikaede examined the quiet, exterior lines of the freighter, impressed with the power boosters jutting from the tail section. "You can play with the engines another time," Drake chuckled, guiding the mesmerized Wookiee toward the bridge. In the narrow corridor, he shivered as the cooler air aboard the ship blew over his bare skin. Pulling his father's flight jacket from the console, he shrugged the rough fabric over his inflamed shoulders and slowly sat on the edge of the pilot's chair. In the familiar interior of the *Steadfast's* flight cabin, he thought he could hear his father's voice, echoing starchart calculations and instructions.

"Go ahead," he chuckled, offering the co-pilot's chair to the anxious Wookiee. Leaning into the plush leather chair, Drake suddenly sat upright, feeling a discomforting bulge against the small of his back. Reaching behind him, he felt the warm heel of a heavy blaster against his palm. "By all the moons of Nal Hutta!" Drake gasped, echoing one of Anchor's preferred expressions. Raising the blaster from its holster, he recognized it as Anchor's most prized possession, the only weapon to survive 30 years of the Corellian's dangerous lifestyle. Brought out for only the most auspicious ventures, the modified blaster was formidable, even without its power pack. "How did he know where ..." Drake grinned mischievously, knowing that the tenacious smuggler had ways of knowing everything that transpired above or beneath the sands of Socorro.

Beneath the blaster, inside the customized holster, Drake found an antiquated, personal datapad. Before the days of keypads and data-punch boards, the obsolete instrument used a magnetic stylus to imprint information directly onto the dim screen. Perusing through the entries, Drake was astounded by the neat calculations and astrogration maps scrolling before him. Every route that Kaine Paulsen had ever explored and used for smuggling, from the most bizarre entries to the routine, were recorded there.

"These were the short cuts," Drake whispered. The last entry was a detailed schematic of the Thrugii asteroid belt. "Nikaede, what's on the cargo manifest?" he asked, staring blankly through the ship viewscreen. "Not the main cargo bay, ship's stores." Distracted, the Socorran stood up, strapping the blaster around his waist. "Six months of consumables? Emergency rations." Grinning roguishly, he ordered, "Realign the relays and set the proximity alarms to maximum. We'll need a constant-active sweep to avoid the sector authority sensor tags."

The astute Wookiee recognized variations in the codes, modifications radically opposed to the normal coordinate planes of space. Shrugging, she input the peculiar heading and barked to her captain, adding a sharp yowl to punctuate her inquiry.

"Yep, we're going to the Thrugii outpost," he replied.

Listening to the gentle whistle of the *Steadfast's* engines, Drake toggled the lift controls, guiding the freighter through the narrow crown of the volcano. Socorro's sun met them at the rim, throwing an acute glare across the unsullied hull, as the starship sped across the dark shadow of the Doaba Badlands. "Bring up the running lights," he ordered, "all of the them, including the search beacons."

Profiled by her exterior running lights, the *Steadfast* banked sharply below the skyline, speeding over the uneven mounds of the Doaba Badlands. Brilliantly illuminated search beacons crisscrossed the land of Kaine Paulsen's birth in a silent tribute, heralded only by the thunder of the freighter's engines. As the *Steadfast* sped over the external flight pad outside of Anchor's home, Drake caught a glimpse of the old Corellian waving a glow rod in the darkness, signaling the traditional wish for clear skies.

Nearly imperceptible against the first glances of dawn, the *Steadfast's* shadow faded quickly as the freighter abruptly ascended into the red and yellowed atmosphere above the planet. Drake Paulsen kept his eyes on the open space before him, harboring no regrets as the shadowy face of Socorro dissipated beneath him. Finger poised over the hyperdrive cue, he activated the system, instinctively, without thinking and without looking back.